DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 308 105 SO 019 936

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TITLE The Use of Primary Sources in Western Public Culture.
PUB DATE Dec 88
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association (103rd, Cincinnati, OH, December 27-30, 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Conference Papers; Course Content; Curriculum Development; *Curriculum Enrichment; Higher Education; *History Instruction; Instructional Materials; *Primary Sources; *Resource Materials; *United States History; *World History

ABSTRACT

A desire to make historical source documents central to the exposition of basic themes in a two-semester class on European and U.S. history since 1500 led to the development of a pilot course at Assumption College, Worcester, Massachusetts. One of the three weekly class meetings was devoted to a discussion of the source materials. In order to remove the traditional barriers that make such documents unappealing to students (i.e. lack of a historical context, archaic language), explanatory headnotes and a limited glossary were provided. Essay assignments were given which were designed to probe certain fundamental themes. The students, however, turned to the more familiar textbook for information and ideas. Consequently, efforts were made to focus the lectures and discussions more on the documents, and a preparatory exercise was added to the essay assignment. Although the program's purpose was to organize basic information prior to the writing of the essay, and its aim was to increase student usage of the source documents, students still tended not to use those documents. Eventually, it was only by incorporating the source documents directly into the preparatory exercises and essay assignments that a way was found of making it impossible for the students to avoid using them. It was hoped that students would develop a sense of historical method and appreciate how source documents could be interpreted in various manners to support different historical perspectives. (PPB)

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AMERICAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
ONE HUNDRED THIRD ANNUAL MEETING

December 27-30, 1988

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SESSION NUMBER: 198/7

TITLE OF PAPER:

THE USE OF PRIMARY SOURCES IN WESTERN PUBLIC CULTURE

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The Use of Primary Sources in Western Public Culture

Primary sources were used by our department in the context of a new introductory course funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Neither time nor space permits me to describe this course which deals in two semesters with Europe and America since 1500. We have, however, made available syllabi and other course materials for your perusal.

When our department began planning the pilot offering of this course, there was no question that primary sources would play an important role. We agree with other historians that such documents are the very stuff of history. Samuel Johnson put it very plainly in saying, "All history, so far as it is not supported by contemporary evidence, is romance." (James Boswell, Boswell's Journal of A Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D., Frederick Pottle and Charles Bennett, eds., [New York: Viking Press, 1936], p. 392.) While we may or may not agree with Johnson's strict constructionist approach, we agree in giving pride of place to documents as essential to the historical narrative.

And so it was that we planned that at least a third of our class time would be focused on primary sources. As our syllabus indicates, each week we dealt with a unit of study covering such seminal events or movements as the Renaissance, Reformation, the French Revolution or the American Civil War. Working within the framework of three class meetings per week, we provided students with background through a key lecture on the topic under consideration. A discussion class followed based on textbook or other secondary readings. Finally, a third class was devoted to a discussion of primary sources.

It has long been a commonplace for teachers to include documents among the variety of assigned student readings. However, all too often, the syllabus was designed around a textbook or other secondary sources. These works acted as the driving force that made the course go. Primary sources, while perhaps informative served as window dressing. It was our department's conscious intention to avoid such tendencies by demonstrating that documents were central to the historical narrative. At a very basic level, these documents acted as classic expressions of central themes. Such expressions might serve as sources of information to be compared or contrasted with data gleaned from textbooks. So we could use excerpts from Jean Baptiste Colbert on mercantilism to expose students to a contemporary seventeenth century view which may or may not conform to what they found in their textbooks.

We tried to assist our students to better understand the documents by providing them with focus questions. Such questions, which were to be answered in journal entries, acted as guides for reading the documents and as themes for class discussions. More importantly, they helped to show the relevance of the primary sources to all the other data examined during the week.

We also tried to remove those barriers that typically make documents inaccessible to readers. The student's lack of historical context, the document's archaic language and convoluted phrases, combine to make the sources seem strange, foreign, and therefore, unappealing to the freshman reader's eyes. The first remedy we came up with was to provide students with explanatory headnotes, a limited glossary and other clarifying explanations.

The desire to make the documents central to the course was also reflected in the design of our three essay assignments. Each assignment asked students to discover certain fundamental themes from the welter of material before them. For example, our first assignment asked whether individuals in the late Middle Ages and early modern times were experiencing greater or lesser ranges of choice in their lives. In short, we were asking students to reflect on the meaning of "individual freedom" as it could be observed in specific events. Such an assignment also entailed their understanding of the religious, cultural, economic and political forces at work in that period. Though students could draw upon all of the resource material available to them in the course thus far, we placed special stress upon primary sources as reference points in marshalling their data.

Students, of course, do not share Samuel Johnson's or our appreciation of the value of historical documents. In the course of our work, we learned in new ways how students could avoid our efforts to help them share in that appreciation.

At the outset, we expected that students, given the proper direction would use whatever information was available to them. We had foreseen that primary sources might be the least accessible part of the course. What we had not anticipated were the student strategies used to avoid the tricky waters of the unrefined and untranslatable primary source. A perusal of student essays revealed that primary sources played a minor role at best. They were either ignored or treated in a perfunctory manner. Upon reflection, we recalled that previous discussions of the documents in class had not been greeted with enthusiasm by the students. Avoiding the true challenge of the essay assignment, students interpreted the task before them in minimalist terms. They, in other words, followed the path of least resistance and tried to bypass the documents as a source of information and insight. Instead, they turned to the more familiar textbook for information and ideas.

As the second semester approached, we realized that changes in our use of primary sources were needed in all aspects of the course. For example, we needed to relate textbook readings more closely to the documents and thus provide the students with a broader context. Similarly, our keynote lectures had to make closer and more frequent reference to the documents in order to have them figure more prominently in the larger narrative. Also we decided to fine tune our essay assignments by requiring that what we called "sub-assignments" be submitted prior to the completion of the student essays. Here was a preparatory exercise which asked students to organize on one sheet of paper all of

the basic information needed to make sense out of the assignments. Included in such a sub-assignment, we hoped, would be references to how selected primary sources would contribute to their completion of their essays. By and large, students found that these preliminary exercises were quite helpful in moving them to pull together data and organize their thoughts. As we helped them develop a strategy for writing, they also saw more clearly how documentary evidence could be integrated into a historical essay. Despite this gain, the use of documents remained an unfamiliar experience and students continued to be wary.

As we continued to experiment during the second semester, we realized that progress could be made if closer relationships could be made between the historical record as seen in primary sources and the "primary" or "contemporary" sources from the student's own times. While still exposing them to documents befitting the period under study, we asked them to find sources in current newspapers and magazines that formed analogues to those from past events. For example, in dealing with Wilson's Fourteen Points and its principle of self determination of nations, students found newsclips referring to recent events in Soviet Armenia which helped to illuminate the issue of national autonomy.

Our record of success during our pilot year was an uneven one. Although many features of the pilot offering went quite well, we knew that we had not managed to make documents central to the course. Our focus questions, while highly effective in helping students to separate wheat from chaff in dealing with textbook information, were not doing enough to strengthen their grasp of the documents. Students, in fact, were using our unit themes, lecture notes and focus questions as building blocks to constructing essays. On the one hand, this was what we hoped they would do. But we had not anticipated their being sufficiently satisfied with this technique so that they would not feel the necessity to do anything else. The past year's assignments had not effectively coerced students into struggling with the documents. They could get by without them, and too many did. We, therefore, began our review of this problem by focusing less on the course narrative as such and more pointedly on those important essay assignments. They were the bottom line of the course toward which our unit themes, focus questions and classroom discussions were targeted. In short, we began by drafting paper topics and then worked our way back to questions of unit sequence and content.

Any student, in a candid moment will agree that what a course makes you do is what that course is about. In this sense the essays are what the course is about. We, therefore, decided to build the use of the primary sources into the essay assignments, to make it impossible for students to write their papers using only class presentations or secondary materials. One way of directly dealing with this problem was to incorporate documents into the essay assignments. For example, in asking students this semester to consider how the new monarchs of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries acted as agents of modernization, they had to use the "Golden Speech" of Elizabeth I, a document not

previously used in class. In turn, that document had to be used in conjunction with other primary materials used in class which related to the larger question of how modernization emerged out of the Middle Ages. Similarly, as students submitted their preparatory sub-assignments we required that they indicate specifically how documents would be used to write their forthcoming essay.

Finding ways of moving students to grapple with primary sources is only half the battle. It is also critical that we help them read the documents intelligently. So we decided to build a formal rhetorical model for reading into the course. The model we chose treats each text as having a speaker with specific purposes in mind, a specific audience she or he intends to reach, one or more messages that she or he wants to convey and one or more strategies that she or he wishes to employ to accomplish these purposes. We devoted several class meetings to using this model in reading specific documents. Also journal questions were designed to have students apply this model to that day's readings. Once students developed some proficiency in using the model, we returned to using the sorts of content-oriented focus questions used last year. This does not represent a shift away from the course's substantive concerns, but rather it is an effort to help students read documents more incisively.

We are also convinced that the course needs to work on several cognitive levels in using documents. The first is content, defined as information. Students need to know, at least temporarily, what the Edict of Nantes was. What were the provisions of the Missouri Compromise, and so on. The second level of cognition involves problem solving, defined in terms of the ability to ask and answer standard questions in the discipline. Students need to know that the academic study of the western experience is organized around certain standard problems: Why did the Renaissance begin in Italy? Why was Great Britain the first nation to industrialize? Why have communist revolutions taken place in non-industrialized societies? A potential difficulty here is that students can treat these problems, and textbook answers to them, as though they entailed only the simple gathering of information. Making use of documents to answer these questions, can, we believe, help them to see how problematic textbook answers often are. On the other hand, the questions themselves, once reflected on, will help them to understand how to use the primary sources. For example, excerpts from The Wealth of Nations could be used to highlight the British entrepreneurial frame of mind when placed in contrast to documents portraying German artisan protests against the breakup of the guild system. At the same time, when students are faced with a mass of data dealing with the Industrial Revolution in England, the use of select documents can help to organize their thoughts around certain seminal questions.

This takes us to the third level on which the course needs to work, the "epistemic" level, an approach developed by David Perkins, the Harvard educational psychologist. Students need to grasp how historians frame questions, what kinds of

explanations they accept as satisfactory, and what sorts of analytical devices they use to organize their studies. The course cannot become one on historical method. Nevertheless, it must help students develop enough fluency in that method so they can appreciate why some pieces of information are more significant than others, why certain problems rather than others define the historical task.

Our students were succeeding at the first level; namely learning content, during the first year. They were also doing fairly well on the second level; namely problem-solving in the sense of replicating textbook answers to standard questions. However, they did tend to rehearse explanations of historical developments like industrialization or the rise of modern science as though they were processing discrete bits of information. We want them to build on the factual information they have accumulated and on their familiarity with underlying issues in the field to acquire an understanding that history must be written from a specific point of view, that one's ability to understand the past rests finally on one's ability to understand one's perspective. Primary materials when placed in different interpretive frames of reference, take on different meanings for students. For example, we can show students how a primary document such as Martin Luther's 95 Theses has different historical meanings when observed from a distinctly Protestant or from a distinctly Catholic perspective. The document takes on yet a different meaning when examined from a modern ecumenical perspective. In addition, we try to encourage each student to think through the historical meaning from his or her own perspective.

Despite some disappointment in reaching these goals, we are consoled by the fact that we have recognized some of the obstacles standing in the way of using primary sources and that we are in the process of removing some of these barriers. More importantly, our pilot year experience has moved us to see the multiple levels of meaning that can be drawn from these documents especially when used as learning devices to put our students in touch with their past. We do not know for sure that the student's ability to read documents will improve markedly or if their grasp of history as a way of thinking will catch up to their grasp of it as a body of knowledge. Time will tell, as will the grades yet to be submitted to the registrar. At the least, our understanding of history and how to teach it has deepened.